

Editorial

Reflections on a Post-Katrina Transplant Program

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With the recent 5th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, we have all spent considerable time reflecting. When I close my eyes, the memories are so vivid that they seem like yesterday. But as I look around, so much has changed since then: our city, Ochsner Health System, our transplant program, and of course the Saints. We finished our last pre-Katrina liver transplant early Sunday morning, the day before the storm hit.

After the levees failed, with the city seemingly ruined and our patients evacuated to transplant centers around the nation, we wondered if our transplant team would stay together, if we would ever transplant at Ochsner again. We did lose key personnel, forcing our lung and pediatric heart transplant programs to close. But the adult heart, liver, and kidney transplant programs quickly became active. Our first kidney transplant was performed approximately 2 weeks after the storm (we faxed a pass to get this out-of-town patient through the National Guard checkpoints), and we performed our first liver transplant less than 1 month after Katrina (the day before Rita made landfall). I personally will never forget the crazy, hectic months that followed. They were exhausting and depressing, but sometimes exhilarating. Katrina blew away the loose leaves. Those who had a choice and chose to stay firmly grasped that hard work and teamwork would be necessary to rebuild. Our transplant team is filled with those people.

Five years later, we are now the largest multi-organ transplant center in the Gulf South. We performed a record number of kidney, liver, and

kidney/pancreas transplants in 2009, with our liver program ranking as the 10th largest in the country. We are on pace to beat all of those 2009 records in 2010. Last year, we became one of only a few programs in the country using robotic technology to facilitate live donor kidney transplants. We reopened the pediatric cardiac transplant program in 2010 as well as our lung transplant program, which remains the only lung transplant program in Louisiana. In post-Katrina New Orleans, every transplant program successfully recruited additional physicians and surgeons of exceptional talent, a feat we thought would be more difficult than it was. And through all of this rebuilding and regrowth, we have focused on quality and have continued to improve outcomes. Our heart transplant recipient 1-year survival rate is now over 90%, and our liver recipient 1-year survival rate is 94%, both better than the national average. Our kidney recipient 3-year survival rate is 97%, making it one of only 11 programs in the country with a rate statistically higher than expected.

Over the next 5 years, we will continue to differentiate ourselves by delivering superior quality, by focusing on patient satisfaction and improving the patient experience, and through the use of innovative surgical techniques and new technologies. It is exciting to be part of Ochsner and the city of New Orleans, where excellence is expected. And I am proud to be part of the Ochsner transplant team, a team composed of people who strive to deliver excellence every day.